

Plan to Store Nuclear Waste in 25 States

Until the 'spent' fuel can be recycled

KNDO – KNDU
December 22, 2006

The government would store civilian nuclear waste for up to 25 years at federal sites across the country under a proposal in the Senate to deal with growing volumes of used reactor fuel at power plants.

The waste sites could be built to accommodate plants in a region or individual state, said Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., who included the provision in a \$30.7 billion spending bill that advanced out of his Appropriations subcommittee on Tuesday.

The interim storage approach is aimed at addressing increasing concern about thousands of tons of used reactor fuel accumulating at power plants, waiting to be shipped to an oft-delayed central government repository in Nevada. Industry officials have said the failure to address the waste problem will inhibit investment in new nuclear reactors.

The proposed Yucca Mountain waste site in Nevada – where the used fuel would be kept deep beneath the Earth – has yet to receive a license from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. It is not expected to open, even if a license is approved, before 2018, Energy Department officials have told Domenici's staff.

"I think we've begun to resolve the nuclear waste problem," said Domenici of the interim storage idea. "This is an orderly way to do it."

The Energy Department maintains that it is currently barred from creating temporary storage facilities for civilian reactor waste.

The proposal received the support of Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada, who strongly opposes the Yucca Mountain project in his state and who has said the used reactor fuel should be kept where it is, at power plants in 31 states.

Reid called interim storage on federal land "Yucca neutral" but he also clearly views the Domenici proposal as a way to have the government take the waste – as it is obligated under contracts with utilities – and keep it out of Nevada.

The bill also would include nearly \$500 million for the Yucca Mountain project and \$270 million for a first installment on a Bush administration proposal for reprocessing nuclear fuel as part of an international program to boost use of nuclear energy.

The House has slashed the reprocessing funds to \$120 million, about half of what the administration had sought for the fiscal year beginning in October.

Currently there are more than 50,000 tons of highly radioactive nuclear waste in form of spent reactor fuel rods at nuclear power plants in 31 states. The government under contracts is obligated to take the waste off the utilities' hands, but has not done so because it has no place to put it, pending completion of the Yucca facility.

Domenici's proposal would give the Energy Department authority to build temporary storage facilities on federal land, or purchase private land for such a facility with a license to keep the waste for up to 25 years.

Some utilities already have filed lawsuits – and won favorable rulings in the courts – claiming the government owes them millions of dollars for failing to take the waste by a 1998 deadline.

Domenici's proposal is likely to be controversial because it would give the Energy Department authority to build a waste facility within a state even if a state or local authorities objected.

The department would only have to consult with a state's governor. It would require a license from the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission including compliance with various security, safety and environmental regulations.

Under the proposal, any federal land would be eligible except national parks, wilderness areas and wildlife refuges. Or, the government could purchase private land from any willing seller for the facility. A site may not be located in either Nevada, the site of the Yucca project, or Utah, where a private nuclear waste facility is being proposed on the Goshute Indian reservation.

Reactor waste now kept at closed power plants could be kept on site, but waste on any operating reactor sites must be moved, under terms of the proposal, after the government takes title.